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Magazine

VIVIAN WILLIAMS

TO A WOMAN DYING YOUNG

By Julia Del Brandon

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The Washington Post Magazine

VIVIAN WILLIAMS 1952-1986

You never heard of her. She liked to cook and garden, loved her cats and hanging out, was crazy about her boyfriend. Then she died, a victim of infuriating negligence. But she once lived, and that should not be forgotten ■ ***By John Ed Bradley***

HE OWNED THREE CATS. THERE WAS PIERRE, THE ONE THAT came with them from Aspen Grove, the one named Fifi and the one named Balzac, after Honoré de Balzac, the French novelist.

Alan, the man of the house, had not always looked kindly upon the animals. In the beginning, he was known to grow deeply disturbed by their odd behavior, their rituals of bathing with their scratchy pink tongues, of hiding their stool under kitty litter, of flopping on his head at night.

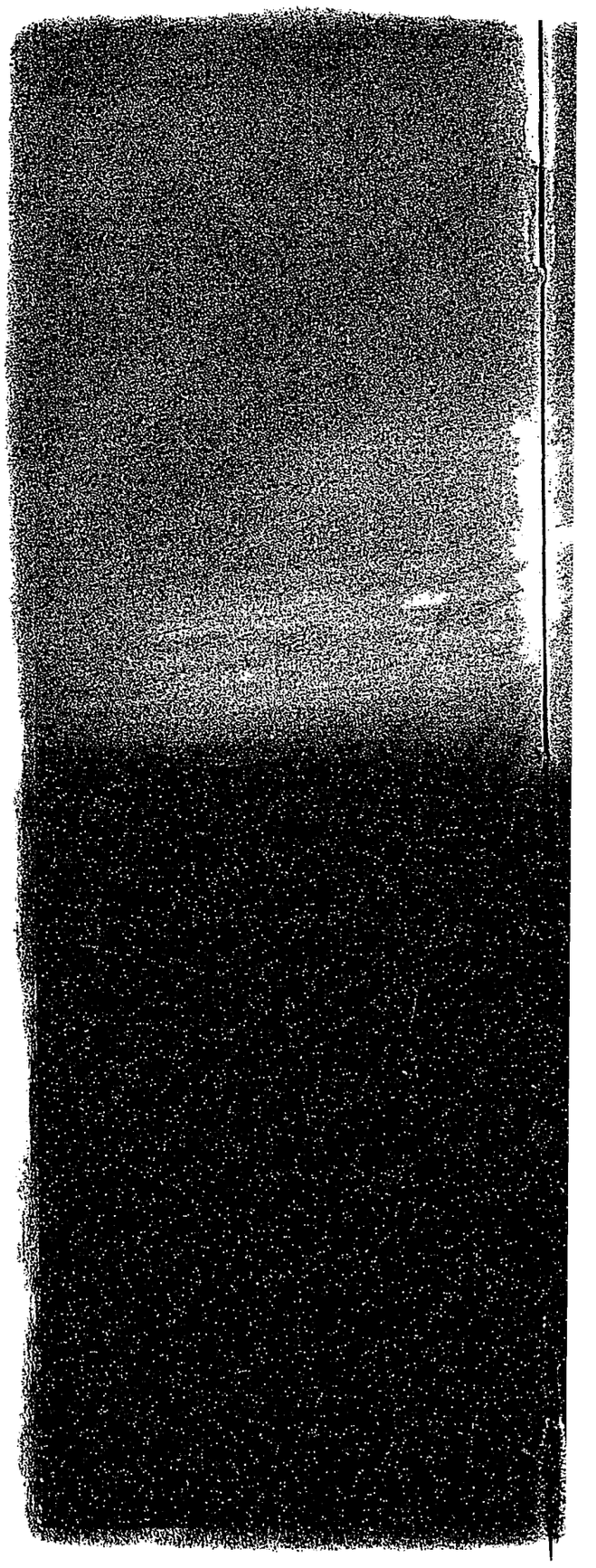
Some mornings at 4 or 5, they ran screaming over the furniture, upsetting lamps, toppling couch pillows. They seemed to be having a fine time, though at the expense of anyone trying to get a little sleep.

Vivian Williams, who was Alan's girlfriend, believed Balzac was a person trapped inside a cat's body. Well, she may not have believed it as so but she did accept it as enormously possible. They called Balzac "Balls," and when someone asked if he was of Persian or Himalayan breeding, they said no, Balls was just a good old cat with long hair who liked to eat a lot.

If Alan learned something from those cats—from "Vivian's cats," as he calls them—it was that it is possible in this world to love something you never would have loved had someone close to you not taught you how.

So Alan Mattern, who loved Vivian, came to love cats.

Last spring, when it became necessary to rent a hospital bed and place it on the first floor of their small wood-frame house near Lorton, none of the cats seemed to give a care as to what was going on around them. How simple, how regular their lives were. Vivian, gravely ill with invasive cervical cancer, rarely left the bed, and it was strange to see Alan working so diligently at the kitchen stove when Vivian herself was the cook of the family. The cats were fed and looked after, and though Vivian sometimes needed a wheelchair to move around, or went from one point of the house to another shuffling along, dragging two urine bags by her side, she was at least with them all and her voice still filled the rooms. She petted the cats and spoke to them; she made sweet purring



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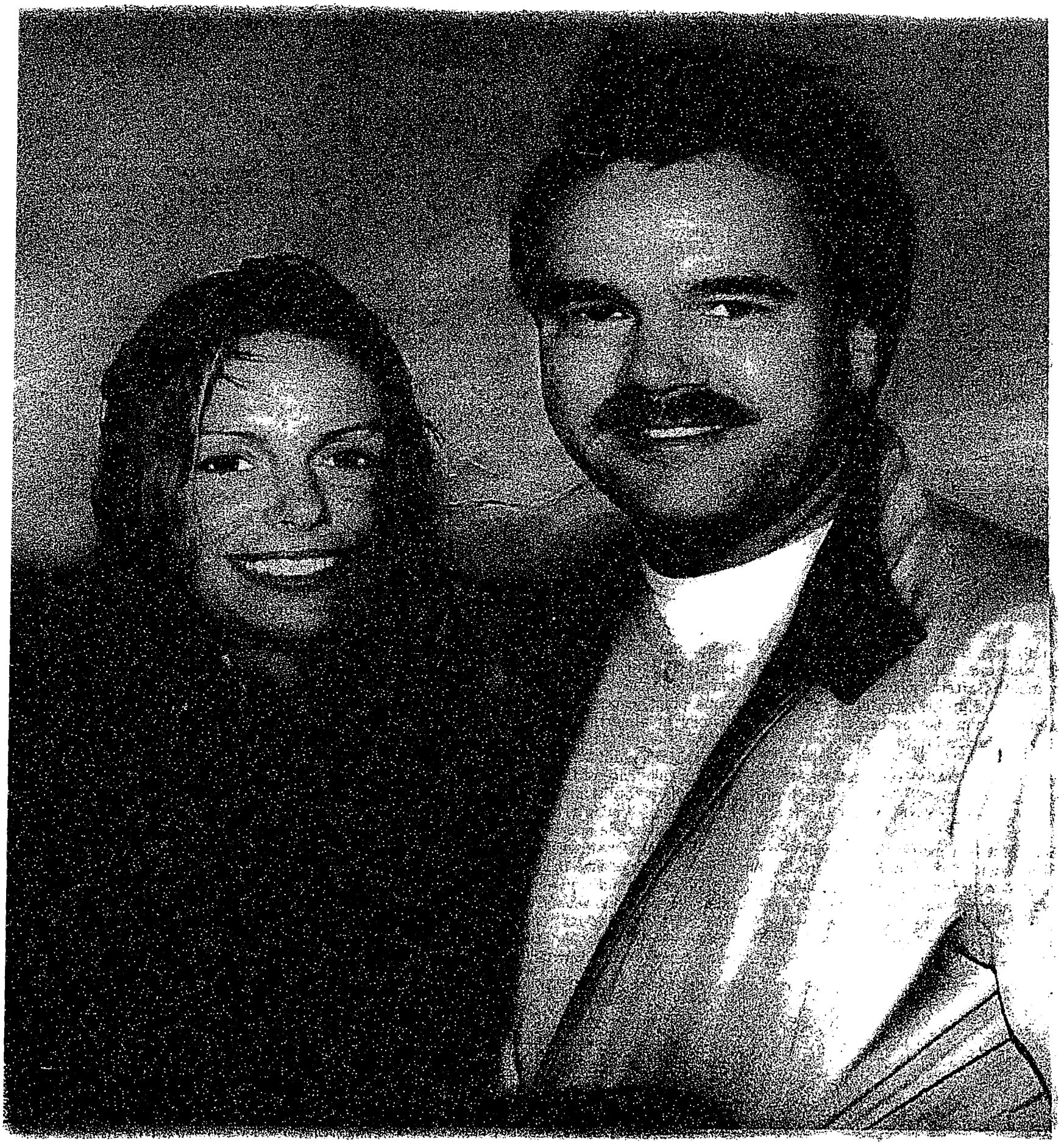

VIVIAN WILLIAMS AND ALAN MATTERN

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sounds. And as always, she was the keeper of their souls.

"I'm not speaking to Fifi today," Vivian told her mother one afternoon when she stopped by to visit.

"Oh, no. Why?"

"Because she was mean. She beat up a little bird."

In late summer when Vivian went back to the hospital, Balls, more than the other two, seemed to sense that a great tragedy was at hand. He began to mope around, lacking the energy that once had made him seem so immensely human. Had Alan attempted to tell the animals what was happening, to detail the horrible and painful ordeal of Vivian's dying, would they have understood? And how might he have confronted this awkward, imbecilic language of death?

Alan himself was having a difficult time articulating and making sense of it. Words came forth then stopped; he cried and shook his head. It was one thing to say, "Vivian is going to die," and it was another to believe it.

How could anyone who knew Vivian believe it?

In October, Alan returned the rented bed, and then all three of the cats knew, or at least suspected, that something very wrong and unforgivable was happening. They seemed lost when Alan came home to feed them. Fifi curled up quietly near the radiator. Balls watched the door for Vivian.

"It's funny how smart those cats are," Alan said one Sunday afternoon nearly two months after Vivian died. And yes, Balzac picked up his furry little head and looked at him in plain agreement.

It was funny, all right.

SHE WAS SO MANY THINGS—BEAUTY, chef, sister, friend, lover, daughter, dreamer. Lastly, she was a cancer patient.

Alan Mattern did not like seeing Vivian's name in the newspaper, especially when it concerned her medical malpractice suit against both the Alexandria Women's Clinic—where she had gone regularly for gynecological care since 1980—and Dr. Harmen vanDer Woude, the owner of the clinic. She was such a private person, it seemed almost perverse to open the paper and see the headlines: CANCER PATIENT AWARDED $3 MILLION, *FAIRFAX JURY FINDS CLINIC NEGLIGENT IN HANDLING PAP TEST*; $3 MILLION MALPRACTICE AWARD UPHELD, *JUDGE OVERRULES VA. LAW LIMITING VERDICTS TO $1 MILLION.* The December 1986 obituary was simpler. All it had was her name in capital letters, VIVIAN LILA WILLIAMS, her whole life reduced to three short paragraphs.

She was 34 when she died.

During the course of the September 1986 trial, a witness for the plaintiff said that Vivian would have been "100 percent salvageable" had she been informed of the results of her 1982 Pap test and received treatment. According to testimony, Vivian returned to the clinic in 1983 for her annual Pap test but was not informed of the previous year's results. In 1984, Vivian went back to the clinic because she was bleeding between periods, and soon thereafter the cancer was discovered.

According to the defense, Vivian was contacted by the clinic when repeated Pap tests in 1980 and 1981 showed that she had mild dysplasia. The defense maintained that follow-up appointments were made but Vivian failed to keep them. R. Harrison Pledger, attorney for the defendants, argued that the clinic had tried unsuccessfully to contact Vivian by both telephone and mail about the results of her 1982 Pap test. Pledger also said Vivian should have contacted the clinic at some point, especially because she had a history of abnormal cells. "She was too busy," Pledger said to the jurors. "How many people do we know who are too busy to take care of themselves?"

At one point, in an emotional plea, Brian Shevlin, Vivian's lawyer, said, "She wants to live. She doesn't want a lawsuit." Shevlin said Vivian was afraid to die, but afraid not to because the pain was so bad.

The jury found vanDer Woude and the clinic negligent in failing to notify Vivian that her 1982 Pap test showed abnormal cells in her cervix and that she needed more tests, and it awarded her $3 million.

The defendants filed a motion to set aside the verdict, and in December a Fairfax County circuit court judge upheld the award. Judge Thomas A. Fortkort found Virginia's statutory $1 million cap on such awards to be an unconstitutional infringement on the right to trial by jury and an unlawful interference in the judicial system by the legislature.

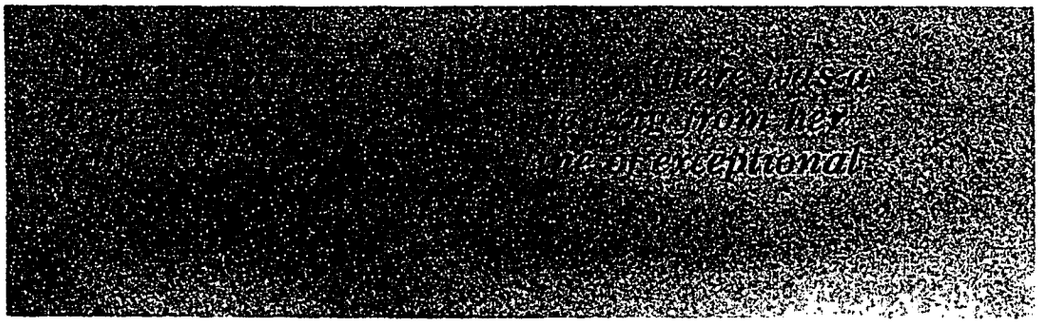
In 1977, the Virginia legislature had tried to limit excessive malpractice insurance awards by imposing a $750,000 ceiling; legislators raised the cap to $1 million in 1983. In his decision, Fortkort said limiting the actions of a jury served to unfairly penalize victims of malpractice seeking compensation for their injuries.

Last month, vanDer Woude and the clinic appealed Fortkort's decision.

Once intensely private, Vivian Williams suddenly had become a public person. As the stories about her legal battles appeared in the paper, Alan Mattern clipped them out and put them in a large photo album. The album is full of pictures of friends at picnics, of family, of the cats, of trips to the beach at Florida and Chincoteague, Va., of Vivian just getting up from a nap, of Vivian in her Mercedes-Benz, of Vivian being Vivian, of Vivian.

He met her at the Hawk 'n' Dove, the popular Capitol Hill restaurant. She had long hair and sad shining eyes, and a less secure person than she might have been excessively proud of owning such a clean, delicious figure. He had known her, though not well, for all of two years. She used to like to sit at the alley bar and talk about sports, meet new people, drink and smoke. Alan was a bartender, recently divorced. He had lived with his wife for only about six weeks, during his first year out of Indiana University, and after the breaking up he had moved forward, away from that time and place. He had a degree in radio and television, but there he was tending bar. It was a living. He always had a friend in the crowd.

Vivian had dated the owner of the Hawk 'n' Dove for almost six years, and this, the bar, the wooden stools, the walls crowded with pictures and things, was home. She often said it was like her living room. One night when her boyfriend was away playing golf in Florida, Alan gave her a lift home. He was tall and had a fine athletic build; he had a mustache and straight brown hair parted down the middle. He had always considered Vivian to be unapproachable, the boss' girl. People tiptoed around her, and she knew this and had come to rather enjoy it. This night the bartender who was supposed to drive Vivian home decided instead to participate in an all-night poker game somewhere in town, and he asked Alan to



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LOREDANA WILLIAMS, SANDI WILLIAMS RUSH, WILLIAM WILLIAMS AND VIVIAN, ON SANDI'S WEDDING DAY

please see to it that she got home safely.

Alan, tired after a long night's work, did not much like having to drive her home when empty cabs cruised up and down Pennsylvania Avenue, waiting for the strip of bars and restaurants to close, the nighthawks to surrender the dark.

They sat on the living room floor and talked for hours. It was Friday night, Saturday morning. And she knew she would make him love her. How did she know? She just knew, she said. But why him; why Alan? She could not say why. She could say only that he was the one, that it was meant to be, that it felt good and pure and right.

He was guarded at first, less willing to leap into such romance. He said, "What are you doing?" And when she wondered what he meant, he said, "You sleep and wake up, get dressed and go to the Hawk 'n' Dove. What are you doing with your life, Vivian?"

What could she say? "I'm not happy, no," is what came out. Then, after thinking about it awhile, she said she liked to cook. This was her dream—to work with food, to be a chef.

"It's something to work toward," he said.

They agreed that she would make a fine chef, but of course on this night they would have agreed with almost anything each other said. How could Alan know then that what was happening was unavoidable? Vivian had somehow waited for him, without really knowing that she was waiting, and then he appeared—Alan Mattern, plain as day. She told him there had not been much of a relationship with her old boyfriend for more than three years, and how could he question this confession? She was persistent, untiring in her faith in him to come around, to see what might, what must evolve between them.

Years later, after she was dead, he would say she dragged him into the relationship kicking and screaming, and kicking and screaming he could not help or stop himself.

When her boyfriend returned from Florida, she told him it was over. That was on Sunday. She was moving out of his life, she said, starting over. She did not bring up Alan. It was very difficult for Vivian because this man had been good to her and loved her truly and here she was pursuing someone she hardly knew. It occurred to her that she didn't even know if Alan Mattern had a girlfriend, but it seemed not to matter. She knew only hope in her sudden lucidity. She was fearless.

Alan stopped working at the Hawk 'n' Dove, but this was not unexpected. They would be impelled to reorder their lives; they seemed to have no other choice now that their bright circles had been entwined. There would be an entire season of change and compromise. She decided to stop going to Dr. James Bulger for gynecological care because he was a close and longstanding friend of her old boyfriend. Her decision to quit seeing Dr.

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PIERRE AND BALZAC

VIVIAN AND ALAN'S HOUSE IN ASPEN GROVE, VA.

Bulger was not difficult. She wanted Alan to be happy with her. She would begin again in every way and eliminate whatever she considered necessary to propel her life along.

In April 1980, she looked in the phone book and found a women's clinic that was not far from the shopping mall in which she planned to spend part of the morning. It was as simple, as complicated as that. It may have taken her five minutes, perhaps less, to choose the Alexandria Women's Clinic. Also, she would save money using the clinic, as much as $20 a visit—enough for dinner, a surprise for Alan, a new cookbook.

They gave up their apartments—his in Arlington, hers in Fairlington. And they moved to Aspen Grove, a historic Fairfax home that had served as a Civil War hospital. They first lived behind the great main house in a tiny, tumbledown place that had once served as slave quarters, and then in the converted carriage house. They paid $150 a month in rent and loved the place because it was romantic and perfect, even if it was unheated, ancient and slouching miserably toward the wrecker's ball.

This was their first home, and they practically lived on top of each other, which, Alan often said, was not so bad a thing.

She wanted to marry him. She wanted to be certain that he would always be there. He told her, "I'm here, aren't I? As long as I'm here." He was happy just to be near her. He would look at her working away in her little herb and vegetable and flower garden, sweating, smudges of soil on her face, and say, "All the damn time she looks so pretty," and she startled him. She was full of something, a rare magic, a grand promise.

She told him, "You love me perfect," and he corrected her. "Perfectly," he said. "It's perfectly, Vivian."

"You love me perfect," she said again.

She was the girl made for him, and he believed this. She was the love of his life, his one and only; and he burned for her. As a boy in Indiana, he had walked two blocks to church every Sunday, to the Church of Christ, and prayed for things. But as a man with Vivian he had felt no need for prayer. Who or what did he need as long as there was Vivian? She was everything. When finally he asked her to marry him, she said, "Uh, no rush." She may have said something else, but she was certain of what they had become. Okay, she said, one day they would get married and have children. He assumed that if the children got her genes they would be good-looking; they would be fine, handsome kids. They made one

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promise to each other, one plan: to grow old together.

They wanted to be 85 years old together, 95, 100.

DYING EVERY DAY, SHE STILL TALKED about writing her life story, never stopping to wonder who out there might be inclined to purchase a copy of *The Autobiography of Vivian Williams*. It was her life, and it was interesting enough for Alan to say, "You should do it." Who better to tell it than the one who had lived it, who then was still living it?

"I know I should," she said.

She knew well her inheritance, what those before her had blessed her with. Her father, William Williams Jr., grew up in Cross City, Fla., a town in the northwestern horseshoe of the state, not far from the Gulf of Mexico. Winters were damp and cold, and his father, Vivian's Grandfather Williams, always complained when moving the potted plants from the back and sides of the house into the main living area so that they might be spared the hard frost. He liked the plants just fine, but moving them was hard on his back.

This is just a little story, but it shows where she got her dreamy love of gardening—of freshly tilled earth and sun and most everything that grows green. In that boyhood home of her father's, there had been an elemental knowledge of gardening. There was a pride in planting a seed or a seedling and watching it grow, and this was a gift given from one generation to the next. It was hand-me-down love. Her father joined the Army at 18, not long after the Second World War, and he met his wife, Loredana Tempesti, in Trieste, Italy. Perhaps this is where Vivian came by her love of cooking; there was a long line of exceptional cooks on her mother's side.

Two people in love had come together, and there she was: Vivian.

She used to like to say that she was born in Williamsburg, Va., the daughter of William Williams. There was something important and essentially English about all those Williamses placed next to each other in a sentence. "William Williams lived in Williamsburg," she would say.

Vivian didn't celebrate her birthday twice in the same town until she was at St. Mary's High School in Alexandria, but the moving here and there did not turn her inward. She was neither shy nor brooding. Her father, who retired from the military in 1968, lived in 18 different places during his 20 years in the service, moving his wife, Vivian and younger daughter Sandi across the ocean seven times before finally settling in Northern Virginia. Vivian studied and grasped languages easily and often spoke Italian with her mother at home; she learned what she could about whatever new home she had before packing up and heading for another.

At Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, she majored in international studies, thinking that perhaps there might be opportunities for her to work as a diplomat in the Foreign Service once she got out of school. She relished her freedom, life on her own. Except for holidays, she rarely returned home. Most of her summers were spent at school, and her parents missed her. Loredana had wicked visions of Vivian graduating from college and returning to live in some cheap apartment complex in downtown Washington, so she encouraged her husband to invest in a refurbished Shirlington condominium. They put enough money down on the property so that the monthly mortgage note would be small, and they fibbed a little and told Vivian they had bought the place as an investment, not to keep her safe and close to home.

Vivian found work as an interpreter at the Ivory Coast Embassy, but for the most part, the job bored her. She translated U.S. magazine and newspaper articles into French, and she did secretarial work, most of which she found tedious and unrewarding. To combat her growing disillusionment, her fear that all of grown-up life would be mindless toil and regimen, she began to thoroughly live the nights and gained a modest reputation as a free-spirited and independent sort.

She dated a lot and seemed not to have a trouble or care in the world. She seemed content, sitting in the alley bar at the Hawk 'n' Dove, holding court with a group of similarly young and freewheeling people.

She met Michael Judge at the bar, and they became instant, fabulous friends, "the beauty and the drifter," as he would later describe their friendship. He then was working at a bar on the Hill after having lost his shirt in Spain, where, hoping to strike it rich, he had invested heavily and unwisely in a greyhound race track. She recognized in him a wild rebellious spirit, and a kindred one. She offered him a room in her apartment, and he accepted. Both agreed that the arrangement would work only on the condition that nothing of a sexual nature develop between them, and they set off to make their marks—his as a photographic artist and art dealer, hers as manager of a little plant store called the Green Gourmet.

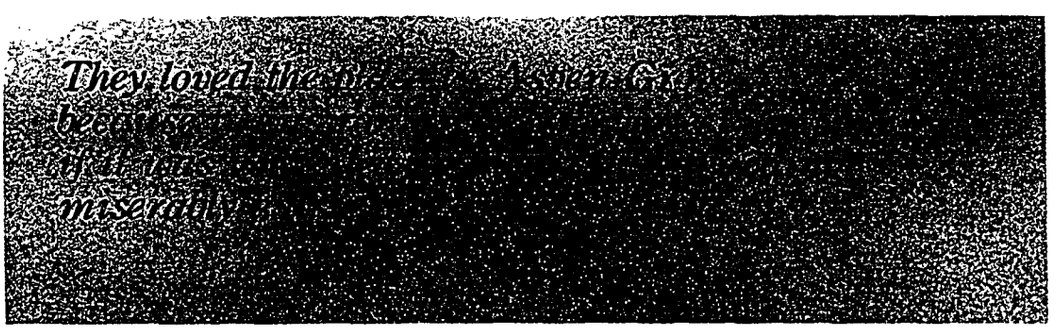
Her burgeoning enterprise was in a Fairlington shopping center in the midst of suburbia, an oasis in the developing sprawl. Vivian lived just across the street from the shop, and she rode a bicycle to work each day, with Balzac the cat riding in a straw basket fastened to the handlebars. On lazy spring days, Michael Judge often set up a chaise longue and beach umbrella at the entrance to the plant store, kicked back with a can of beer and watched the traffic go by. Vivian nurtured sick plants and laughed when Michael, tired of the suffocating heat, invented exotic stories about the origin of all those green things, seductively wheedling housewives to share their wealth for the sake of the various tropical wonders hanging right before their eyes.

Vivian did not know what to make of Michael when he told her about his out-of-body experience, the time he drifted out of life and into death and liked it. He explained that he had somehow gotten into a brawl with a Korean woman in a Fort Sill, Okla., bar, and she had tried to remove his eyeball with her fingernails. At one point in the hospital emergency room, he said, medics had covered his face with a white sheet, assuming him dead. An allergic reaction to medication had nearly killed him, but so near to death, he had embraced a new life by floating out of his body and retreating to a warm wonderful light.

"Death is life," he told Vivian.

When she questioned him, he said, "Now I know there's nothing to be afraid of. You die and go to the light."

Her business did not take off, and she struggled to make rent, which was less than $300 a month. She particularly detested providing plants to clubs and restaurants and discovering that customers had deposited their burning cigarettes



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into the sod and delicate roots of these living things. Sally Adlesh, a neighboring businesswoman who ran the Mustard Seed, a religious gift and book shop, had been robbed one night at gunpoint, and a few days later she sent her assistant manager over to the Green Gourmet to find out how Vivian was getting along and if she might be interested in joining her in a new, larger facility in the same shopping center. Sally thought that combining forces might help them better protect themselves. Vivian agreed, knowing that it would lessen the burden of managing her place alone and keep her safe from gun-toting men in masks. She closed the store. At Sally's place, she read cookbooks when business was slow, studied recipes and imagined herself leading the kitchens of celebrated restaurants.

Then came Alan. "It's something to work toward," he had told her that night in her living room, and shortly thereafter she was out of the plant business and working as a salad girl at Rampart's Restaurant in Alexandria. She was 27 years old, a college graduate, smart and beautiful, and yet she considered herself blessed to experience so directly the world of lettuce, radishes, cucumbers and tomatoes. She wanted to be the best salad girl there ever was, and when she said as much to friends, they laughed and shrugged their shoulders. She was making little more than $3 an hour. Her parents didn't understand it. Her father put his face in his hands and shook his head. "What about all that time in college, Vivian?" he said. "Why are you doing this? You're throwing your life away."

She knew why, as difficult as it was to explain. Falling in love with Alan had at last liberated and set her free. Every fine possibility now awaited her; how could she fail? When she returned home to Alan dirty from all those hours at the sink and garbage pail, after having prepared salad after salad after salad, she felt a certain incredible peace that made her heart soar. "I'm proud of you," Alan liked to tell her. "You know that? I'm really proud of you."

"Why are you proud of me, Alan?" she said.

"Just because of you," he said. "Just because you're Vivian."

In three years she would be part-owner and manager of A Deli Named Desire, a gourmet shop and caterer, situated next door to Rampart's. From top to bottom, the menu was hers, including the mysterious and extremely popular C.J. McPhee, a triple-decker club and chicken salad sandwich named after one of their friends who had died as a result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident. She and Alan had called the real C.J. McPhee "Chicken Lips" or "Lips" because whenever someone asked him if he was going to have a drink tonight, his response was, "Does a chicken have lips?" The new business was a terrible load of responsibility, and she complained that she spent too much time baby-sitting employes and not enough time in the kitchen, creating new recipes and perfecting old ones.

The demands of catering huge Christmas and Thanksgiving parties often left her exhausted, and she called on her sister Sandi to help. Vivian took great pride in her work and once spent 24 straight hours laboring in the kitchen, preparing food for a job that had come her way at the last minute. It was a day or two before Christmas when she and Sandi delivered the great spread of food to a banquet. As Vivian told it, she received no help from the men waiting for the party to commence, and she felt that the woman who had reached her about the job was rude and dictatorial. The woman said, "You mean that's all the hello dollies there are. Why so many brownies?" (A hello dolly is a dessert.)

The woman made an elaborate show of writing the check due Vivian in front of the gathering of partygoers, and said, "You know I really should give you only half of this money because of the few hello dollies there are on the dessert tray. I would never order so many brownies. Who's going to eat all those brownies?"

Vivian, upon receiving the check, tore it up into little pieces and threw it at the foot of the woman, who stammered for words. "Merry damn Christmas, lady," Vivian said and stormed out of the building, Sandi close at her heels.

"Merry damn Christmas."

Another time, after catering a dinner party at a private school, she cleared out the banquet hall, dumped the trash, swept the floor and was preparing to head home when the lady who gave the party told her to vacuum the hall. Vivian said, "Sure, lady. You just wait right here while I run out and get my Electrolux." Vivian left and hit the road in a squeal of tire rubber.

In the spring of 1984, she and Alan were in Florida, vacationing near Sarasota, when she began to spot blood between her periods. She thought it may have been some negative reaction to her birth control pills, and she decided to go to the Alexandria Women's Clinic as soon as they returned home. When she called to make an appointment, the person on the other end of the line asked if she had ever visited the clinic, and Vivian said she had.

"Many times," she said.

Later that afternoon, someone at the clinic told her they must have misplaced her records for there was nothing on file to show that she had ever been to the clinic before. Vivian was surprised. She had experienced some mild dysplasia back when she was still seeing Dr. James Bulger, her previous gynecologist, and he had performed cryosurgery in his office to remove her abnormal cervical cells. Dr. Bulger had always stressed the importance of having annual checkups and Pap tests, and she had heeded this by going to the clinic on a regular basis beginning in 1980. But now because she was bleeding so badly, the attending physician was unable to get a culture from her cervix for a Pap test, and this doctor gave her the name of a Northern Virginia gynecologist to see as soon as possible.

Vivian called and made an emergency appointment. The next day, she visited the doctor, who told her there could be various reasons why her cervix was in that condition. The doctor gave her a prescription for sulfa cream and told her to come back in 10 days for a Pap test.

Vivian worried that something was seriously wrong, though she said little about it. She allayed her fears by telling herself that if something had been wrong with a previous Pap test, the clinic would have informed her immediately and provided treatment to correct the problem. According to Vivian's trial testimony, she had heard nothing from the clinic, neither by phone nor written notification, and each year when she had gone in for a checkup and Pap smear, none of the nurses or doctors had mentioned or questioned her about previous abnormal tests.

She returned for her second appoint-

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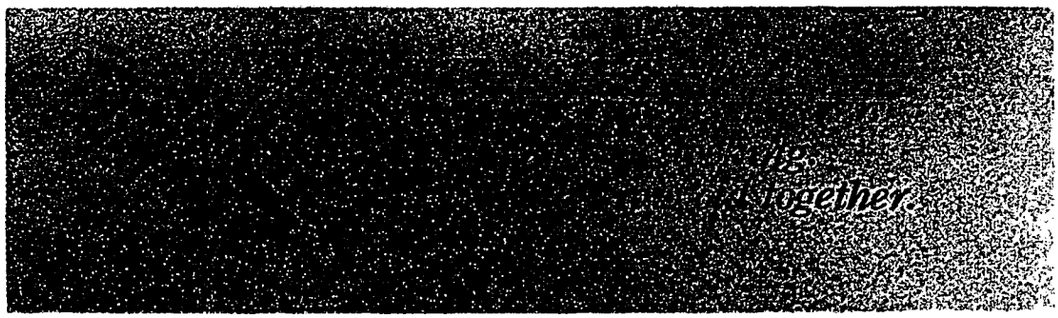

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VIVIAN AND CHILDHOOD FRIEND

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VIVIAN

ment with the gynecologist, who, during the week, had been able to obtain Vivian's records from the clinic. The gynecologist wanted to know why Vivian had not done anything about her abnormal Pap tests over the last few years. Vivian said she knew nothing about the abnormal tests. Two days later she went to Alexandria Hospital for a conization. A conization is the surgical excision of a cone of tissue from a diseased cervix. Vivian nurtured the hope that her condition was carcinoma in situ, but the pathology report showed that she had invasive cervical cancer. Vivian got the news over the telephone. Numb and not comprehending exactly what she was being told, she wrote everything down on a piece of paper. When Alan got home from work later that evening, he said, "Hear anything?"

"Yeah," she said.

She told him. And they sat on the couch and cried.

After she healed from the conization, Vivian went in to Georgetown University Hospital for a radical hysterectomy. She was sad and upset not only because of the cancer but because this meant she and Alan would never have babies. During the surgery, Dr. Sherilynn Hummel learned that Vivian had positive pelvic nodes, and the operation was stopped. Removing her uterus was not going to be enough, and keeping it might make subsequent radiation treatments more effective.

But as it turned out, the 35 sessions of external radiation she endured in the following weeks were not enough, and neither were the two radiation implants placed in her cervix.

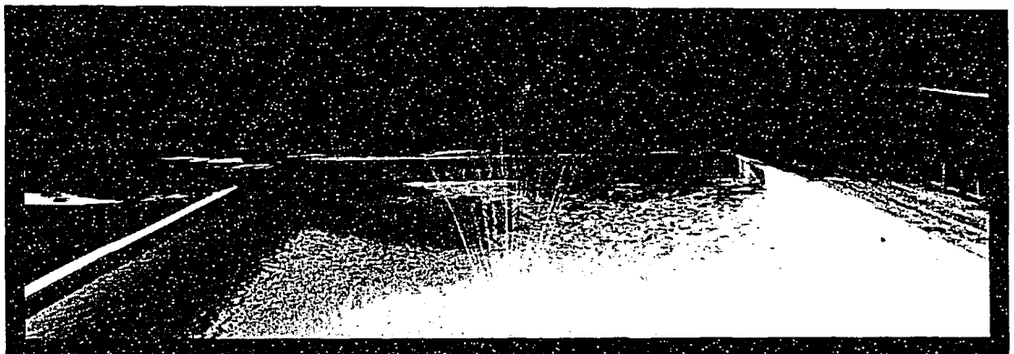
Vivian did, however, respond well to chemotherapy, and, by January 1985, she felt fine. The tumor they had found had disappeared; there were no signs of cervical lesions. She continued to visit Dr. Hummel, and she and Alan were happy to get on with their lives. They left Aspen Grove and bought the little country place near Lorton, and once again they talked of getting married. She still had the deli, but soon she would give up the business for something more rewarding. All the old dreams resumed, including the one in which she, the celebrated chef, toils away at a spitting gas stove in one of the country's great kitchens, creating steaming miracles for people who crack the hard bread, drink the wine and send back word of their delight.

Yes, the white-hatted chef, the *artiste*; she would be this person.

She applied for a job at the Inn at Little Washington, Va., one of the area's finest restaurants. She was willing to return to her days as a salad girl, to perform virtually any unheralded kitchen chore to be in this place and away from the baby-sitting and managerial chores of the deli. She had no culinary portfolio, yet at the same time she was overqualified for a cleanup job, and she wanted too much money for what little experience she offered. She did not get the position at the Inn, but she did not stew. She thanked the chef for considering her. She said she was proud to have met him.

As it happened, her sister Sandi Rush was having recurring dreams of a back twisted and grotesque, nerve endings exposed. The vision haunted and terrified her. She was dreaming of Vivian, or perhaps it wasn't a dream. They had always been connected this way, in this spiritual, family way. Once, years ago, Sandi had gone to pick up Vivian for a night on the town. She had knocked on the door, and when Vivian opened it, she saw that they were wearing the same suit of clothes, the same shoes, the same hairdo. They had made no plans to wear identical outfits, but there they were, twin spirits giggling in the twilight. And now this, this picture of pain, of Vivian near death. The horror of the nightmare left Sandi weak.

It was little more than a week after interviewing for the job at the Inn that Vivian received a call from the chef informing



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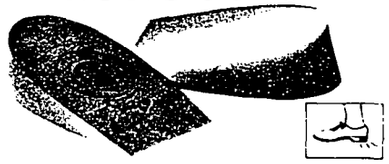

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VIVIAN

her that she was the person he was looking for after all. A position on his kitchen staff had become available, and it was hers if she wanted it. Vivian was elated. But she regretted having to tell him that her cancer was no longer in remission. She was down again.

She would not be able to work.

SHE HAD SO WANTED A FUTURE WITH Alan, the two of them together in the little frame house they had bought in the near-country, living each day in quiet celebration. Even when she was ill and less than six months from death, she felt lucky to be so near to this man. He set up the rented bed downstairs, knowing it would put her in the center of things. From where she lay, she could see through the living room door to the kitchen, the Florida room and the deck on back, and the television and VCR were against the wall in front of her. The tumor that pressed against and twisted her spine prevented her from walking straight up.

To get from the bed to the bathroom, about ten paces away, she had to brace her hands just above her knees and lift each foot as if she wore leaded shoes. She still needed her privacy. When she wanted to take a shower, he set up a chair beneath the showerhead, turned up the hot water until it was just right, then helped her inside. She called, "Alan! Oh, Alan!" as soon as she was finished and ready to be toweled dry.

In the spring of 1986, Alan planted a garden near the budding run of apple trees. She liked to sit in the warm wash of sun, smelling the bright new season, and watch him work the soil, and some days he showed off for her. He acted like a royal goof, dancing up and down the dark rows, making faces. Other days, when he thought he was alone in the garden, he would suddenly feel her presence, look up and see her there, smiling and with those two urine bags by her side. "Are you spying on me?" he called out.

"Yes, babe, I'm spying on you."

One day she walked out wearing a terry-cloth wraparound skirt, and when he spotted her standing on the deck, she turned her back to him, lifted the dress and mooned him. "Hello, Alan," she said, flashing her white behind.

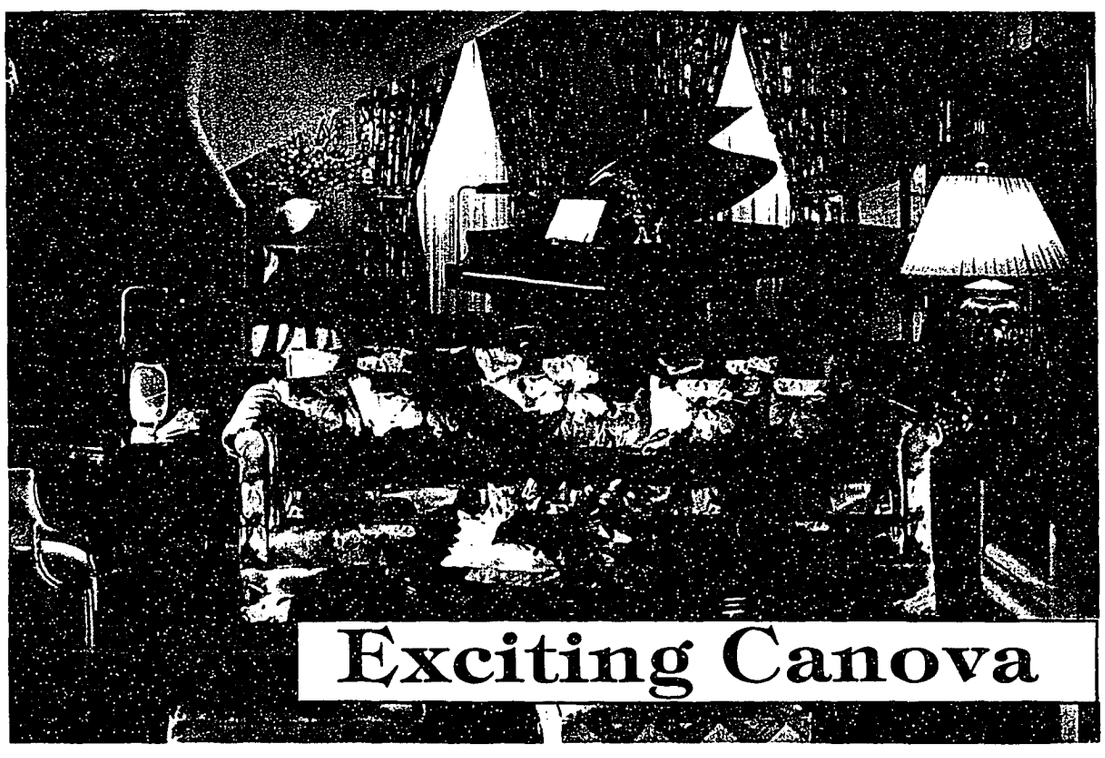
He cooked whatever she wanted. When she was going through chemotherapy, her appetite seemed deranged; she liked the oddest things at the oddest times. But he fed her gladly. He wanted to make her strong again. If she said, "Wouldn't spaghetti carbonara be good right now?" he would hustle upstairs and put on his shoes, retrieve the car keys and head to the market. She coached him as he worked at the stove. "Now add some of this," she would say. "Now some of that."

Once she wanted grilled fish and he raced to the store and came back with calamari, much to her disappointment. He rolled the squid in flour and fried them in oil, and she liked it well enough. Still, her very favorite food was fried chicken, green peas and mashed potatoes.

The garden grew. She watched it and enjoyed it as some people watch and enjoy a favorite television show. By the end of summer, not long before she returned to the hospital for the last time, a small number of deer began making nightly trips to the apple trees on the edge of the property. Often the deer rested right out in front of the deck—a doe and her fawns. Vivian loved the deer, and she recognized their intelligence. They seemed to be waiting for her and aware that the mere fact of their existence in this human domain gave her great pleasure. Once Alan turned on the back floodlights, illuminating much of the lawn, and seeing the deer, he carried Vivian outside. By then she weighed about a hundred pounds, and she felt good and warm in his arms. "Look, Vivian. Do you see them?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "There they are."

She was not a vengeful person. After she had become so ill that she was forced



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VIVIAN

to return to Georgetown University Hospital, she told Sandi that she never would have sued Dr. vanDer Woude and the Alexandria Women's Clinic had Dr. vanDer Woude told her he was sorry for what had happened to her. Dr. vanDer Woude was the sole shareholder of the stock in the clinic. In his March 1986 deposition, he said he presently worked about 15 hours a week at the clinic, performing abortions and providing family planning for patients. He also maintained a private practice in Vienna. Vivian did not recall ever meeting or seeing him in the office; although vanDer Woude said he had examined her on one occasion in 1982, his conduct was not at issue in the case. In general, she had been attended to by nurses and by physicians who were working under contract with the clinic.

Vivian told Sandi that she had simply wanted Dr. vanDer Woude and the clinic to tell her that they had been negligent in failing to inform her that her Pap test had shown abnormal cells and to admit their mistake. She told her sister, "All they'd have to do was tell me they're sorry." She wanted an apology and an admission that they regretted not being able to rectify the situation; and she wanted Dr. vanDer Woude to accept the guilt of what had happened to her.

Brian Shevlin said he proposed settling the case out of court for $200,000, the total amount of both Dr. vanDer Woude's and the clinic's medical malpractice insurance coverage. The insurance company, in charge of the defense of the clinic and the doctor, would go no higher than $50,000, according to Shevlin. Vivian considered this a severe display of arrogance, a statement of how little regard the defendants had for her case against them, and she vowed to appear in court and tell her side of the story, no matter how bad she felt.

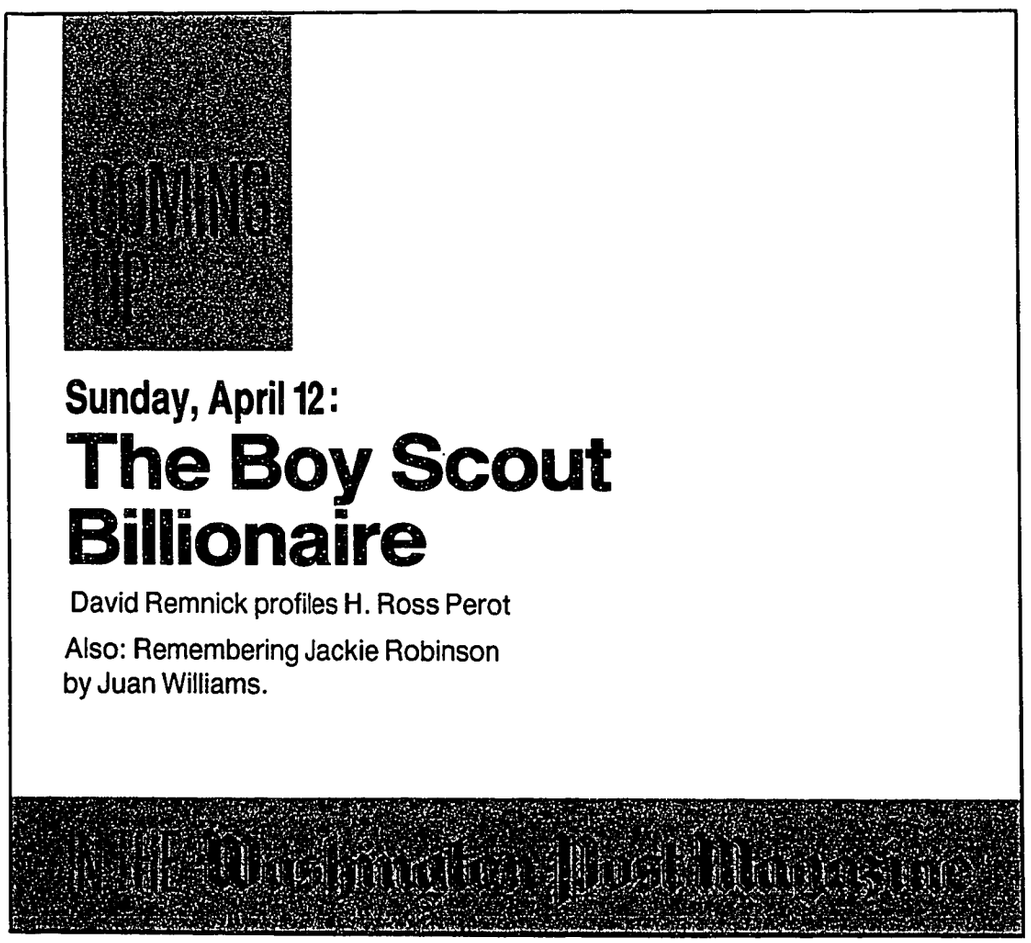
On September 14, the day before her 34th birthday and the day before the trial was set to begin, Alan still had not decided what kind of gift to buy for Vivian. He knew it would be her last birthday, and so did she. Bill and Loredana Williams remembered how once, when pushing Vivian in her wheelchair through the glass doors of the hospital, she had asked them to stop upon spotting a framed watercolor of tulips hanging on the wall. The picture, depicting a golden plank of sunlight on the wall of a red-bricked building and a cluster of flowers growing out of a crack in the pavement, had caught her eye. Loredana bought the picture, but when they presented it to Vivian, she started to cry and said, "Please, take it away. Take it out of the room."

By the time the trial began, Vivian felt very weak and was suffering with bouts of violent diarrhea and vomiting. She could not control her bowel movements, and she was in intense pain. She struggled to make herself comfortable in bed. She preferred not to take morphine to numb the pain in fear that it would cloud her thinking. She wanted to be sharp and lucid when the time came for her to testify. "You don't have to go," her mother said. "You should forget about the stupid trial and just think about getting well."

"I'm going," she said.

Sandi went to Cohoe's in Potomac Mills Mall and bought her a green angora sweater dress. It was a size larger than she normally wore to accommodate the tubes and bags and things that had become inextricably bound to her. Vivian wondered if she should wear one of those extra-large diapers designed for the sick and elderly, just in case she suddenly needed the bathroom in the courtroom. But she decided against it. Sandi helped her get her favorite beige boots on and was amazed at how loose-fitting they were, how much space there was between her legs and the inner lining. Because Vivian had lost her hair during chemotherapy, she wore a turquoise silk scarf with white and raspberry darts on it. Sandi said, "You look beautiful, baby."

A hired ambulance picked her up out-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VIVIAN

side the doors of the hospital. She lay on a collapsible stretcher, staring at the ceiling of the vehicle. She was quiet on the way to circuit court in Fairfax.

As she entered the room, the first person she looked for was Brian Shevlin, her lawyer and friend standing near the plaintiff's table. She smiled when she saw him, and she felt suddenly comforted. Then she spotted the jurors; she looked at their eyes and thought they looked tired and exhausted. She wondered if some had been crying, if the sight of her made them cry. She tried to meet directly the eyes of each one. She testified, and she felt good and relieved hearing the words come out. Although the pressure of the tumor pushing against her spine sent shocks down her legs, she did not wince. She was under control. She was very proud of herself. On the ride back to the hospital, Alan rode with her in the back of the ambulance. She held his hand.

"You won, baby," Sandi said on the phone a few days later.

"I did?"

"Yeah, you did. And you won three million dollars."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not."

"I won three million dollars?"

"You won three million dollars," Sandi said.

Already Vivian's medical bills amounted to more than $200,000, and though she had health insurance, her father would end up paying $40,000 to the Washington Hospital Center alone. The $3 million award, or what part of it she actually recovered, would be split evenly among Alan, Sandi and her parents.

Six weeks before she died, somebody would compare it to winning the lottery and getting killed in an accident on the way to pick up the money, and Vivian, tears cutting her cheeks, would say, "Well, you know you're right."

NOW THAT SHE HAD NO CONTROL OVER her own life, she sought to control what she could around her. She wanted everything just so. The curtains had to remain opened only so far; the bed had to be against this wall; the visitor's chair was to stand at this angle; the sheets were to be tucked to her liking, her pillow fluffed a certain way.

At the hospice at the Washington Hospital Center, where she moved not long after the trial, they first put her in a small room near the nurses' station and kitchen. Then, when the large suite down the hall was vacated, they moved her there, hoping she would be pleased with the spectacular view of Catholic University and the golden-domed shrine that towered above the other buildings. It was a big room, with light streaming through two walls of glass paneling, but she saw disorder abounding, chaos. She had nurses' aides and Alan rearrange the furniture, but she still was unhappy. The room was not cozy; the first thing one saw upon entering was Vivian in bed. She asked to be returned to the first room, the smaller one. She felt better there.

She held Dr. vanDer Woude responsible for her illness and pain. She knew this quiet inner rage, a rawness toward him, and yet, she forgave him.

He had not acted maliciously; he had not intended to bring this upon her. Still, she asked again and again, "Why me? Why? Why did I fall through the cracks?" and when no one could answer her, she put her head back and cried.

Sally Adlesh, her old friend, came by each week and they talked about dying and death and God. Vivian believed her hospital room was a place where you went before taking off on a long voyage; it was like a hotel suite, but once you checked in you could not check out. She would stay in this place until her journey began, and she would make the best of it.

What threatened her most was not the dying—not seeing if there really was a warm wonderful light on the other side, as Michael Judge had said, or a God and a

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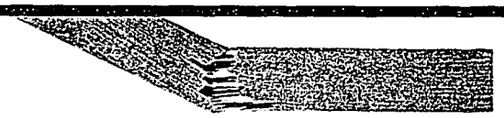

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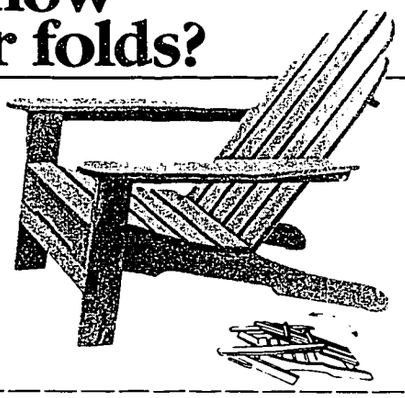

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VIVIAN

Heaven—but the last few minutes of the living, the unconditional surrender to whatever it was that awaited her.

She could resign to death, but not to the death of life.

Alan was working at the Hyatt Regency in Crystal City, but he slept in Vivian's room every night. After finding the couch too uncomfortable, he tried a rollaway bed but could not conform his bulk to its feebleness. He removed the mattress and put it on the floor, but he could not sleep on the floor either. He tossed and bucked beneath the sheets, listening, listening for Vivian across the room. At last he gave up and returned to the couch. In the morning he complained to Vivian that it hurt his back, and she, who lay in excruciating pain, soothed him.

"Poor baby," she said. "Poor babe."

She too controlled the ebb and flow of visitors, of relatives and old friends who arrived, who saw the tragic vision in bed clothes—the pink stocking cap covering the bald head, the drained pallor of the face, the thinness of a body that had once been full and ripe—and who cried. She detested their outbreaks of sorrow. It left her weak, spent. She wanted the familiar, the voice of Alan in her ear, the smell of him. She wanted normalcy, the daily uncontemplative rites of the living.

Alan set up their VCR in the room. This would help. He rented tapes of cooking shows and foreign movies. On Saturdays, they watched one cooking show after another—Julia Child, the Frugal Gourmet, the Great Chefs of New Orleans—and she dreamed of her own kitchen at home, dinner with friends, the times she and Alan had dressed up and tried new little restaurants. They talked about Fifi and Pierre and Balls. Balls was 16 and his kidneys were beginning to fail him. He too was dying.

Alan knew what to say to make her laugh, to pull herself out of the pain, to relieve the terror. He said, "You know Lips"—he was talking about C.J. McPhee, their old friend—"Lips is up there in heaven waiting for you, Vivian. He's got a can of Budweiser in one hand, and he's tapping his foot. He's tapping that old foot of his. And you know what he's going to say when he sees you. He's going to say, 'Well, it's about damn time, Vivian. It's about damn time you got here.' "

She told him she was glad it was her dying and not him. She said she didn't think she could have made it if he was the one dying, and he reminded her how lucky, how blessed they were. He named married couples less fortunate than themselves, others who had never experienced such a peculiar joy and passion. He put his

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arms around her when she was hurting. He hugged her like a man, his fingers pushing against her lower back, the tumor that was sapping her of strength and courage. "Feel it," he said. "Feel it, Vivian. I'm transferring my strength to you."

She said, "Yes. You are, Alan. I feel it. I feel it."

She became agitated with anyone but Alan by her side. She looked for him always, suddenly opening her eyes and peering across the room. His face alone came to her. She wiggled a finger at him. She mouthed the word "Alan," and she faded into sleep. Once when he had returned to their house to check on the cats and make sure everything was okay, she woke mumbling his name. Sandi, who had been sitting in the chair next to Vivian, knew she was confused and on the verge of slipping into a coma. "Vivian? What is it, Vivian?" she said.

"Three," Vivian uttered, hardly audible.

"Three? What about three, Vivian? What about three?"

"Three three nine," Vivian said, dictating the phone number of the little house near Lorton.

Sandi dialed the number and put the phone to Vivian's ear. Vivian smiled hearing someone pick up the receiver, and she said, "Alan. Hi, Alan. Hi, Alan." She smiled listening to him talk, and then she hung up and went back to sleep.

Alan kept thinking that one day he would wake up and everything would be okay, but then it occurred to him that there was no thinking, no guessing any of this away. If God has the power to do this, he told himself, then you'd better not get God mad at you. Just think of what might happen if God got mad at you, if you really did something wrong.

He felt the worst sorrow and regret. Why couldn't this be a dream, something the dark side of him had made up while he slept? He told her, "Vivian, I'm sorry as hell to be losing you, but I'm glad as hell that I knew you." Then he said, "I want you to remember that you're the best damned thing that ever happened to me. You hear that? You're the best, Vivian."

Some days he climbed into bed with her and held her, even when she was out of it and probably not aware that she was being held. He talked to her for hours, even when she couldn't talk. Somebody had told him that it was a person's hearing that went last. So he talked. "I'm so proud of you, Vivian. I'm so proud to know you," he said. And, "I'm a lucky person, Vivian. Do you know that? I may never love somebody again, but I know I did. I did it once."

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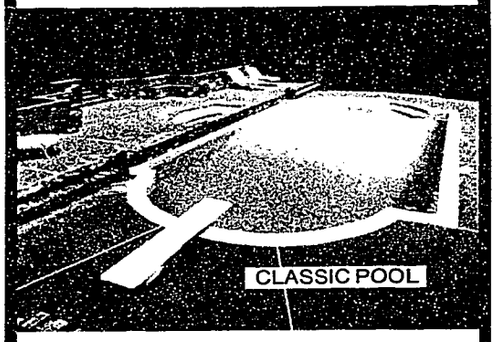

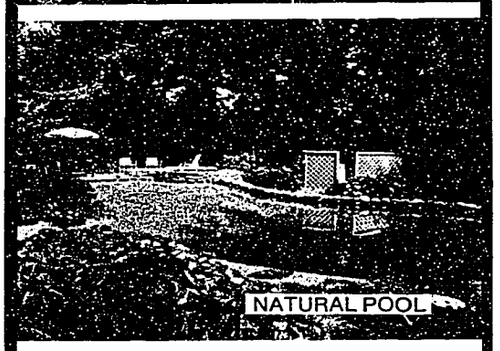

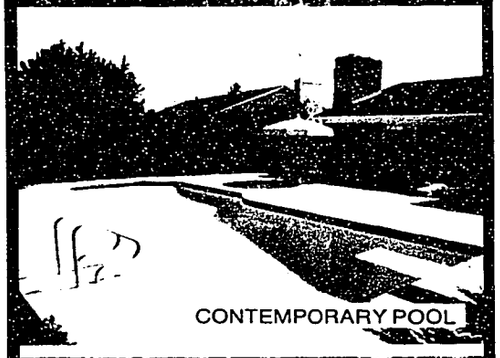

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VIVIAN

that she was ready to die now, he waited until she had drifted off to put on his coat and leave the hospital and walk to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. How many years it had been since he had walked through the doors of a church, he could not say. He saw people kneeling in prayer, a bank of burning candles. The place smelled clean and autumnal, and there was a spirited echo whenever someone walked across the floor or shut fast a missal. He knelt at a private station and folded his hands. He talked to God, the words deep inside of him. He built sentence after sentence unto the Lord, and he cried. "Take her," he prayed. He was shaking. "Please, God. Take her. Take her, please."

One month later, he and Sandi stood watching the torpid beat of a vein in Vivian's neck. Sandi saw it stop, and of course they knew it was time. They both reached to touch her, and then they were holding her.

"Go," Alan said, climbing onto the bed and placing his face against hers. "Go, Vivian. Get away from us. Get out of here. Get away from all this. Get away."

"I love you," Sandi said. "I love you, Vivian."

It was December 10, 1986.

SHE WAS CREMATED, HER ASHES interred at Fairfax Memorial Park.

After the funeral service, Alan and one of Vivian's aunts decided to drive to Aspen Grove, which was not very far from the cemetery. The two little dwellings behind the main house—the slave quarters and the carriage house—had been bulldozed, and Alan stood on the jagged piece of earth where he and Vivian had made their first home. He remembered how cold those distant winters were. There had been an icy frost on the tile of the bathroom walls that you could write your name on. He might have written "Alan + Vivian" or "Vivian Loves Alan," the way kids carve hearts into favorite trees, but it was so easy to say it then, to prove it. He remembered that in the spring she had had a garden—it was just over there—and she had loved him perfect. Or perfectly.

More than anything, she had loved him.

He thought about taking a brick from the rubble and bringing it home with him. But instead he got a flagstone from what had been the walk in front of their little shack, and in time he buried the stone in front of their house near Lorton.

Anybody entering the place had to step on it.

And anybody leaving the place had to, too. ■

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